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Retreating to Advance Women Geoscience Faculty

Suzanne O'Connell

Wesleyan University, soconnell@wesleyan.edu

Mary Anne Holmes

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, mholmes2@unl.edu

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Retreating to Advance Women Geoscience Faculty Geoscience Academics in the Northeast (GAIN) Writing Retreat; Dover, Massachusetts, July 29 to August 3, 2007

Seventeen women geoscientists from New England, New York, and New Jersey assembled for a writing retreat at Boston College's Connors Family Retreat and Conference Center, set on 80 pastoral acres on the outskirts of Boston. Funded through the National Science Foundation ADVANCE program, the retreat had two objectives: to facilitate writing and to develop a supportive community. It succeeded on both accounts. Although new to science, retreats of this sort have long been a highly sought after experience for writers in other disciplines. The potential benefits for scientists, in particular, women scientists, are great. Writing is a cornerstone of our work, yet we struggle to find time for it, juggling the demands of students, teaching, family, domestic chores, and research.

In addition, because women are underrepresented among science faculty, we commonly work in isolation. At small colleges a scientist is likely to be the only faculty member pursuing a particular area of research and coauthors may be more than half a continent away. Because of this isolation, junior faculty women frequently lack mentors to help them navigate the complex system of paper review and proposal writing required for tenure. Even after receiving tenure, senior faculty face similar obstacles and as a result often do not achieve the professional recognition they have earned.

The retreat was devoted primarily to writing interspersed with a few seminars. The seminars included a presentation about networking as a means of reinforcing each other's work, presented by the president of the Massachusetts Chapter, Association for Women in Science. On Tuesday morning, Anne Greene, the director of Wesleyan University's writing programs, presented a workshop on the craftsmanship of science writing. During the afternoon she met individually with participants to discuss their writing projects. For many this was the highlight of the scheduled events. Wednesday, the program evaluator from the University of Rhode Island's ADVANCE program met with participants to help the project focus on other needs of geoscience women that could be addressed during the remaining years of the grant.

Many factors contributed to the success of the week. In the rambling mansion that houses the conference center, everyone could find a quiet nook in which to work. Most important, though, was the esprit de corps of the participants. In a generous atmosphere of camaraderie, participants shared work and family experiences and provided strategic tips.

In such an environment, it was easy to ask questions that in ordinary circumstances junior faculty are not likely to ask senior faculty. Can you just call a program manager? How do you get invited to a Gordon Conference? What techniques do you use to complete research papers? Senior faculty discussed lack of recognition and the tight funding situation.

During the week, drafts of several papers were completed and some were even submitted. Everyone was infused with energy as they made arrangements for future contacts including agreeing to read at least one other person's paper, invitations to speak, and of course next year's retreat. More information is available at <http://www.wesleyan.edu/gain>.

--SUZANNE O'CONNELL, Earth and Environmental Sciences, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut (soconnell@wesleyan.edu); MARY ANNE HOLMES, Geosciences, University of Nebraska at Lincoln (mholmes2@unl.edu).